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ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary discusses how the principles in first language acquisition can be applied to second language learning and summarizes a variety of techniques employed by teachers towards that end. It discusses first language acquisition, narrative strategies, conversational strategies, and creating contextual experiences. It concludes that whether a teacher uses narrative strategies to initiate dialogue, provides opportunities for guided, instructional conversations, or utilizes tools to help provide a greater context to lesson plans, second language learners will benefit from meaningful, purposeful, and relevant experiences to hear, learn, and practice speaking in their newly acquired language. Contains 22 references and links to 5 Internet resources. (RS)

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Oral Language and the Second Language Learner

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Introduction

Recent research suggests that the most effective way to learn a second language is similar to that in first language—namely, through functional and meaningful opportunities to use language to communicate in low-risk settings, with different people, and for various purposes (August, 2002). As language is a major means that human beings use to express the self, communicate with others, and acquire new knowledge, it is therefore important that children develop adequate language skills in order to support their personal, social, and cognitive development. The emphasis on oral language has prompted researchers and educators alike to develop new ways to support the oral language development of ESL learners. This paper will discuss the how the principles in first language acquisition can be applied to second language learning and summarize a variety of techniques employed by teachers towards that end, including narrative strategies, conversational techniques, and the use of tools to create contextual learning opportunities.

First Language Acquisition

Ernst and Richard (1995) summarize how the research in first language acquisition can be used to inform second language learning and teaching. They state that

> ... children learn their first language not by practicing structured drills, trying to get a sentence right, or communing with a book, but by using language as a means to communicate with real people and in real situations. The same applies for students who are learning a second language (p. 326).

Like Ernst and Richard, Winfield (1989) observes that one's native language is not acquired through drills, nor is it immediately concerned with phonics or syntax, but is primarily "internalized, over time, from observation, listening and intuition" (p.8). Using this framework as a guideline, Winfield (1989) suggests that oral language acquisition is only achieved by first, repeatedly listening to spoken language; second, making connections to what is already known; and third, actively practicing those newly acquiring skills. Listening to language being spoken, having opportunities to form individual oral dialogues and/or conversations, and practicing those skills are repeated themes throughout the recent ESL literature. In response to this research, educators have developed a variety of strategies to support the development of oral language skills in their ESL classrooms.

Narrative Strategies

One way to promote language acquisition is to use literature-based activities to initiate dialogue and provide a meaningful context for conversations. Ferguson and Young (1996) argue that literature-based activities, such as reading patterned and predictable books, can help ESL learners familiar with narrative mode of communication, understand the structure of English language, and learn about the syntax, rhythm, and pacing of the English language. After the story-reading, the

students are invited to improvise dialogue or to retell the story, in which they are able to draw on their personal experiences to elaborate the characters' conversations. Cummins (1991) points out that using books in this fashion, especially if the picture books are used in tandem with props, provides a rich contextual experience that enhances the students' understanding (cited in Ferguson & Young, 1996, p.598).

Fassler (1998) notes that using picture books and encouraging a collaborative dialogue between students provides a richer, more meaningful literary and linguistic experience. She proposes that

> ... [ESL] children were limited in their understanding and production of English. However, in their interactions with the picture book, they eagerly used their resources to construct and express meaning and were able to draw on the resources of their peers. (p.207)

Fassler (1998) also argues that combining the context-specific nature of literacy-based learning and the social interactions between students helped to create a more meaningful dialogue and learning experience. Educators are beginning to place a greater emphasis on the social climate of the classroom and the opportunities for collaboration as they explore how to promote oral language among ESL students.

Conversational Strategies

Using literature-based exercises is just one way to encourage oral language among ESL learners. Many researchers are now trying to find ways to make conversation more relevant to the life experiences of second language learners. Perez (1996) finds that building on prior experience allows ESL children to attach a new mental representation to the developing language skills. And as these children attempt to understand and to be understood, they acquire genuine language. McCarty, Wallace, Lynch and Benally (1991), working with Navajo and other Native American children, found that when talk is shared between teacher and student and when students' ideas are sought, valued, and incorporated into curricular content, these students responded eagerly and "quite verbally" to questioning (p.53). Similarly, Perez cites other studies (Jordan, Tharp & Baird-Vogt, 1992; Moll & Gonzales, 1995) that support the idea that meaningful, relevant classroom conversation helps students acquire literacy faster and perform better academically. In addition to purposeful conversation, Perez (1996) suggests that classrooms must be structured in the way so that children can interact with both teacher and other students, allowing the children to be active participants and to use their collective knowledge as they acquire language skills (p.178). She proposes:

> Instructional conversations can create a social context where the critical role of discourse is to create student-student relationships and teacher-student relationships that challenge the traditional teacher-centered roles in second language learning. Real instruction conversations can help learners establish connections between social worlds, prior experience, and language to build meaningful new knowledge. (Perez, 1996, p.181)

Gibbons (1998) has also noted that positive interactions between teachers and learners appear to help facilitate language acquisition and the development of literacy skills in ESL learners. Fu and Townsend (1998) concur, illustrating how a supportive classroom environment coupled with meaningful activities, discourses, personal recognition, and time helped make a Chinese boy's entry into American language a positive, fruitful experience.

Abbott and Grose (1998) cite the work of Altwerger and Ivener (1994) and Peregoy and Boyle (1993) when they state that "a rich curriculum and a positive group environment support and enhance the learning of individuals, both first- and second-language learners" (p.175). The authors describe how sharing the culture and language of other ESL students with native English-speaking

students in a culturally diverse classroom benefits all students. Further, the authors describe ways to involve parents of ESL learners into the classroom, providing a rich cultural experience for all children and a meaningful mode of participation for the parents.

Creating Contextual Experiences

In addition to employing narrative strategies and encouraging meaningful conversations in a low-risk environment, researchers have identified a few tools to help create contextual experiences for ESL learners. Using the Constructivist ideology, Olmedo (1996) suggests that all new concepts should be built upon what learners already knows, and she believes that using the oral histories of ESL students can help to provide a richer context for these learners. Olemdo (1996) also argues that using oral histories to create contextual experiences helps validate the child's experiences and gives parents a legitimate role in their child's education while it promotes dialogue across generations, as well as provides opportunities for cooperative learning.

In addition to the ESL learner's oral history, technology can be used as a tool to create contextual learning experiences (Kasper, 2000). Liaw (1997) discusses the positive impact of using a computerized literary reading environment in an ESL classroom. Using instructional TV program with closed captions, Clovis (1997) teaches and reinforces vocabulary and reading, as well as provide a contextual experience for ESL learners.

Another way to maximize contextualized learning experience is through the pairing of singing and signing to increase vocabulary. Schunk (1999) refers to the work of Murphey (1990, 1992) when she suggests that using song and sign language while practicing oral language can improve retention and "trick" the mind into involuntary language rehearsal for "song may act as a LAD [Language Acquisition Device] activator, or be a strategy of the LAD in the ontogenetic development of language" (Murphey, 1990, p.53).

Conclusion

Researchers agree that the development of the oral language in the second language should be similar to that in the learner's first language. Whether a teacher uses narrative strategies to initiate dialogue, provides opportunities for guided, instructional conversations, or utilizes tools to help provide a greater context to lesson plans, ESL students will benefit from meaningful, purposeful, and relevant experience to hear, learn, and practice speaking in their newly acquired language.

Internet Resources

*Center for Applied Linguistics
http://www.cal.org/admin/about.html

*Dr. Cummins' ESL and Second Language Learning Web
http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/

*National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs
http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/

*NCTE Hot Topics on Bilingual/ELL
http://www.ncte.org/elem/topics/109336.htm

*TESOL Connection
http://www.tesol.org/

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